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Academic Writing at Level 7

A Practical Guide for UK Postgraduate Students

What markers reward — and why most students miss it
Critical analysis: the skill that changes your grade
Merit vs Distinction: understanding the real gap
Harvard referencing done right at Masters level
Dissertation and research skills for Level 7
Study planning for working postgraduate students

A free educational resource for postgraduate students in the United Kingdom.
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Editor's Introduction

This guide was written for one reason: most postgraduate students in the UK arrive at Level 7 with strong undergraduate habits that no longer serve them. They work hard, they reference diligently, they structure carefully — and then they receive a grade that does not reflect their effort.

The reason is almost always the same. Level 7 is not a harder version of Level 6. It is a fundamentally different intellectual task — one that rewards critical thinking, independent argument, and scholarly engagement in ways that are rarely explained clearly to students.

This guide explains exactly what Level 7 academic writing requires, why the standard is set where it is, and what practical steps you can take to meet it — module by module, submission by submission.

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It is a fundamentally different intellectual task."**

In This Issue

01	Understanding Level 7 and the UK QCF Framework
02	What Postgraduate Markers Assess
03	Critical Analysis: From Description to Evaluation
04	Building a Coherent Academic Argument
05	Engaging With Current Academic Literature
06	Harvard Referencing at Masters Level
07	The Merit–Distinction Gap Explained
08	Dissertation and Research Skills
09	Programme-Specific Guidance
10	Pre-Submission Checklist and Further Reading

01 Understanding Level 7 and the UK QCF Framework

Level 7 occupies a specific position within the UK's Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). It is the level assigned to taught Masters degrees — MSc, MBA, LLM, and equivalent postgraduate qualifications — and it is defined by a set of learning outcomes that go considerably beyond those required at undergraduate Honours level.

The QCF defines Level 7 in terms of four core cognitive behaviours. Understanding these is the foundation of understanding what your assessments are actually measuring.

QCF Descriptor	What It Means for Your Work
Systematic understanding of current knowledge and its limitations	You must demonstrate awareness not only of what established theories and frameworks say, but wh
Critical awareness at the forefront of the field	You are expected to engage with current debates — not just with settled consensus positions from fo
Originality in applying knowledge	Applying a framework means using it as a lens to generate insight about a specific context — not rep
Self-direction and autonomy	At Level 7, you drive the intellectual process. You identify the argument; you select the evidence; yo

Key insight: Many students interpret Level 7 as 'more work' — more sources, more words, more detail. The actual requirement is different: deeper thinking, demonstrated through writing that evaluates rather than describes.

02 What Postgraduate Markers Assess

Postgraduate marking rubrics across UK universities — including those used in BPP University's marking criteria for Level 7 programmes — consistently assess five dimensions of academic performance. Understanding these dimensions as a connected whole, rather than as separate boxes to tick, is what distinguishes strong postgraduate work.

01 **Critical Analysis**
The ability to evaluate, challenge, and interrogate knowledge — not simply describe or report it.

02 **Literature Engagement**
Evidence of current, high-quality sources used to construct and support an academic argument.

03 **Argument Coherence**
A clear, sustained intellectual position developed and defended throughout the submission.

04 **Theory Application**
Frameworks and concepts applied to a specific context with genuine analytical insight.

05 **Academic Communication**
Clarity, precision, and appropriate referencing that reflects scholarly practice.

Grade Bands

Grade	Mark Band	Marker's Assessment
Distinction	70% +	Independent critical thinking; original synthesis; coherent sophisticated argument
Merit	60–69%	Sound analysis with good literature engagement; clear argument with some analytical depth
Pass	50–59%	Core knowledge demonstrated; predominantly descriptive; limited critical engagement
Near Miss	40–49%	Basic understanding present; significant gaps in analysis, application, or argument

03 Critical Analysis: From Description to Evaluation

Critical analysis is the most frequently misunderstood requirement at Level 7 — and the one that most reliably determines grade outcomes. The challenge is not that students lack knowledge; it is that they have been trained, over years of undergraduate study, to demonstrate knowledge through description. Level 7 requires a different cognitive behaviour.

Understanding the Difference

Descriptive Writing	Critical Writing
"Transformational leadership theory, developed by Burns (1978) and extended by Bass (1985), proposes that leaders motivate follo	*While transformational leadership has been influential, its emphasis on the charismatic leader may underestimate the role of*

The Four-Step Critical Writing Method

Critical writing is not natural for most students — it is a learned practice. The following four-step method provides a practical framework for building analytical paragraphs at Level 7.

Step 1 State	Present the theory, model, or research finding clearly. One to two sentences. Avoid length here.
Step 2 Interrogate	Ask: What assumptions underlie this? What does it fail to account for? Where has it been challenged in the literature?
Step 3 Evidence	Introduce peer-reviewed sources that support your interrogation — recent articles that engage with limitations, debates, or contextual variation.
Step 4 Apply	Connect your analysis to the specific context of your assignment. Abstract critical analysis without application rarely earns high marks.

Self-check: After completing each main paragraph, ask: Have I identified at least one limitation, counterargument, or nuance? If you cannot, the paragraph is likely descriptive — not analytical.

04 Building a Coherent Academic Argument

Structure and argument are not the same thing. A postgraduate assignment can be logically organised, well-formatted, and clearly written — and still lack a coherent academic argument. Understanding the distinction is essential at Level 7.

An academic argument is a position — a claim about the topic that your analysis develops and defends. It is not a summary of different perspectives. It is not a balanced overview. It is an intellectually committed stance, supported by evidence, that your entire submission builds toward.

Anatomy of a Strong Argument

Introduction	State your argument clearly. Not the topic — the argument. What are you claiming? Why does it matter?
Body Sections	Each section should advance the argument, not just add information. Ask: how does this section support or develop my central claim?
Transitions	Show the reader how each section connects to the next and to the overall argument. This is where weak submissions lose marks without realising it.
Conclusion	Synthesise — do not summarise. Show what your analysis has established. The conclusion should feel earned, not repeated.

Before you draft: Write your argument in two sentences. Not your topic — your argument. If you cannot state it clearly before writing, it will not be clear in 3,000 words of prose. Return to these two sentences after each section to check you are still on course.

05 Engaging With Current Academic Literature

The literature you select and the way you use it signals the level at which you are working. At Level 7, literature is not decoration — it is the raw material from which academic argument is constructed.

Currency and Quality

Peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last five to seven years should form the backbone of your literature base. Foundational texts — seminal works that define the field — may be older, and their inclusion is appropriate. But a submission built primarily on textbooks and pre-2015 sources will consistently underperform at Level 7.

- **EBSCO Business Source Complete** — essential for Management, MBA, and organisational studies
- **ProQuest** — strong coverage across healthcare, nursing, and social science disciplines
- **Westlaw / LexisNexis** — primary databases for legal research in postgraduate law programmes
- **JSTOR** — broad multidisciplinary academic journal archive
- **PubMed / CINAHL** — clinical and health science research for healthcare postgraduate students

Using Literature as Academic Argument

There is a significant difference between citing a source and engaging with it. The following examples illustrate the distinction:

Surface Use (Pass level)	Deep Engagement (Merit/Distinction level)
"Servant leadership prioritises the needs of followers over those of the leader (Greenleaf, 1977)."	*"Greenleaf's (1977) original conceptualisation of servant leadership has a*

Reading strategy: Always read the discussion and limitations sections of journal articles — not just the abstract and findings. This is where scholars acknowledge the boundaries of their own knowledge, and this nuance is the material of critical engagement.

06 Harvard Referencing at Masters Level

Accurate referencing at Level 7 is a baseline expectation, not a distinguishing feature. What distinguishes Distinction-level work is not just accurate referencing but sophisticated use of sources — where and how you cite matters as much as whether you cite correctly.

Common Formats: Harvard Style

Source	In-Text	Reference List
Book	*(Author, Year)*	Author, A. (Year) Title. Edition. Place: Publisher.
Journal Article	*(Author, Year, p.X)*	Author, A. (Year) 'Article title', Journal Name, Vol(Issue), pp.X-X. doi:...
Online / Website	*(Author/Org, Year)*	Author (Year) Title [Online]. Available at: URL (Accessed: DD Mon YYYY).
Edited Chapter	*(Author, Year)*	Author (Year) 'Chapter title', in Editor, A. (ed.) Book Title. Place: Publisher, pp.X-X.
Multiple Authors	*(Smith et al., 2022)*	Smith, A., Jones, B. and Brown, C. (2022) Title. Place: Publisher.

Five Referencing Mistakes at Level 7

- Checking your referencing against a generic online Harvard generator rather than your institution's own guide
- Using secondary citations (citing an author you only know about through another source) without indicating this
- Inconsistent formatting between in-text citations and the reference list
- Citing sources you have not actually read in full — this frequently shows in how they are used
- Treating referencing as something to complete at the end — this leads to incomplete entries and missed sources

07 The Merit-Distinction Gap Explained

The gap between a Merit (60–69%) and a Distinction (70%+) is the most searched and least understood grade boundary at postgraduate level. The students sitting at 65–68% are rarely underworking. They are producing solid, competent academic work. What they are missing is a specific set of intellectual behaviours that Distinction-level submissions consistently demonstrate.

Element	Merit (60-69%)	Distinction (70%+)
Argument	Clear position with good supporting evidence	Sophisticated, nuanced argument — counterpositio
Literature	Good range of current peer-reviewed sources	Active engagement with scholarly debates; identifica
Analysis	Key frameworks evaluated with some depth	Assumptions interrogated; multiple theoretical persp
Application	Theory applied clearly to the context	Theory and context are inseparable in the writing —
Writing	Clear and well-organised prose	Precision of language reflects deep conceptual und

The distinction mindset: Merit students answer the question thoroughly. Distinction students answer the question and interrogate what it assumes — what the question itself takes for granted, what a complete answer must acknowledge, and what the limits of any answer might be.

08 Dissertation and Research Skills

The dissertation or major project is the assessment in which Level 7 expectations are most visible — and where the widest variation in student performance occurs. It is also the assessment that most students feel least prepared for.

Core Dissertation Components

Abstract	States your research question, methodology, key findings, and implications. 200–300 words. Write it last.
Literature Review	A critical synthesis of the field — not a summary of sources. Identifies gaps, debates, and the intellectual context your research occupies.
Methodology	Justifies your research design. Explain why your approach (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) is appropriate for your specific question.
Analysis	Interprets findings in relation to your theoretical framework. Reporting what you found is not analysis; making sense of it is.
Discussion	Where Distinction work is made. Connect findings to literature, acknowledge limitations, and articulate your contribution.
Conclusion	Synthesise — do not repeat. What has your research established? What are the implications? What should future researchers explore?

Source quality rule: At least 70% of dissertation sources should be peer-reviewed journal articles published in the last seven years. Textbooks provide background context — they should not form your primary evidence base at dissertation level.

09 Programme-Specific Guidance

While the core principles of Level 7 academic writing apply across all postgraduate programmes, each discipline has specific conventions, assessment expectations, and marking emphases that students benefit from understanding explicitly.

MBA	MBA assessments are typically case-based and practitioner-oriented. Markers look for strategic thinking applied to real organisational scenarios, with awareness of stakeholder complexity. Use analytical frameworks critically — not formulaically. Reflective components should demonstrate genuine self-awareness and connection to professional development, not performative humility.
MSc Management	Research methodology and quantitative literacy are central. Literature reviews must identify a genuine research gap. Methodology sections must justify philosophical positioning (positivism, interpretivism, pragmatism) with reference to your specific research question. Executive summaries are assessed — treat them as a critical component, not an afterthought.
LLM	OSCOLA referencing is required for most LLM modules and differs substantially from Harvard. Legal analysis at Level 7 requires integrated engagement with statutory interpretation, case law, and academic commentary. Avoid summarising cases — analyse their significance, the court's reasoning, and implications for the area of law under examination.
MSc Healthcare Leadership / Nursing	Evidence-based practice is the foundational expectation. Clinical reasoning must be supported by current NICE guidelines, Cochrane reviews, and recent peer-reviewed literature. Reflective writing should demonstrate transformation of practice. Patient safety, ethical frameworks, and NMC Standards should be woven into analysis where clinically relevant — not listed separately.

10 Pre-Submission Checklist and Further Reading

Use this checklist before every Level 7 submission. Each item corresponds to a dimension that markers actively assess.

	Check	What to Verify
[ ]	**Brief alignment**	Have you addressed every part of the assignment question, including the less obvious elements
[ ]	**Central argument**	Can you state your argument in two sentences? Is it clearly visible in your introduction?
[ ]	**Critical analysis**	Does each main section evaluate as well as describe? Have you identified limitations and counte
[ ]	**Literature currency**	Are the majority of your sources peer-reviewed and published within the last five to seven years?
[ ]	**Theory application**	Is theory genuinely applied to your context — or merely described alongside it?
[ ]	**Referencing**	Have you checked every entry against your institution's own guide? Is in-text and reference list c
[ ]	**Conclusion**	Does your conclusion synthesise what your analysis established — not repeat your introduction?
[ ]	**Clarity**	Have you read the submission aloud? Are there sentences requiring more than one reading?
[ ]	**Word count**	Are you within the permitted range? Have you removed padding that adds length without adding

Further Reading and Academic Resources

The following resources are freely available and useful for UK postgraduate students developing their academic writing at Level 7:

- **Your university library database** — EBSCO, ProQuest, and Westlaw accessed through your institution provide the peer-reviewed literature your assessments require
- **Purdue OWL (owl.purdue.edu)** — comprehensive academic writing and referencing guidance for postgraduate writers
- **Zotero (zotero.org)** — free reference management software; strongly recommended for postgraduate students managing large literature bases
- **Google Scholar (scholar.google.com)** — useful for initial source discovery; verify full-text access through your library
- **JSTOR (jstor.org)** — open-access and institutional access to academic journals across disciplines
- **Your institution's academic skills centre** — most UK universities offer writing consultations, workshops, and online resources specifically for postgraduate students